January 25, 2026

CONCERT

Piano Trio in B-flat Major, K. 502
WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born: 1756
Died: 1791
Composed: 1786

I. Allegro
II. Larghetto
III. Allegretto

The year 1786 marked the high point of Mozart's efforts to establish himself in Vienna. From March of that year came two of his greatest piano concertos—No. 23 in A Major and No. 24 in C minor—and he then quickly completed The Marriage of Figaro, first produced in Vienna on May 1, 1786. He next turned to chamber music, creating a steady flow of works through the summer and fall. He brought this creative rush to a close with the Piano Trio in B-flat Major on November 18, followed by the Piano Concerto in C on December 4 and the Symphony No. 38 in D two days later. The symphony would earn the nickname "Prague" when Mozart took it with him to that city in January 1787 for the first production of Figaro there. The triumph of the opera in Prague brought Mozart one of his final moments of unalloyed success. The record of the final five years of his life was one of decreasing popularity in Vienna and increasing poverty, domestic pain (the death of his father and several of his children), and his own illness.

But the fall of 1786 found Mozart at the height of his powers, and during this period he was experimenting with his use of thematic material. Some believe Mozart made the themes of the Piano Concerto in C Major deliberately bland, with the aim of emphasizing their contrapuntal development, and in the first movement of the "Prague" Symphony Mozart derives much of his material from only one theme.

The first movement of the Piano Trio in B-flat Major shows a similar kind of thematic experimentation. The piano plays the opening theme immediately, but then—at the point where he should introduce a second theme—Mozart instead uses a variant of the opening idea. The beginning of the development brings a new theme in the violin, but the piano's amiable opening melody dominates the movement. The other thing that dominates the movement is the sound of violin and piano, for the cello is relegated to a largely supporting role here.

Solo piano opens the Larghetto, laying out the gentle, simple theme that will serve as the basis of the entire movement, growing more ornate with each repetition. Once again, solo piano introduces the main idea of the concluding Allegretto. At last, the cello is given a part with a higher profile as this movement races to its high-spirited close, with much of the energy coming from the flying triplets of its final pages.

Violin Sonata No. 2 in D Major, Op. 94a
SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born: 1851
Died: 1953
Composed: 1944

I. Moderato
II. Scherzo. Presto
III. Andante
IV. Allegro con brio

This sonata, probably the most popular violin sonata composed in the twentieth century, was originally written for the flute. But when David Oistrakh heard the premiere on December 7, 1943, he immediately suggested to the composer that it was ideal music for the violin. Together, composer and violinist prepared a version for violin and piano, and Oistrakh gave the first performance of this version on June 17, 1944. The music remains very much the same (the piano part is identical in both versions), but Prokofiev altered several passages to eliminate awkward string crossings for the violinist and added certain violinistic features impossible on the flute: pizzicatos, double stops, and harmonics. Ironically, the violin version—which profits enormously from the flexibility and range of sound of the violin—has become much more popular than the original.

In contrast to the bleak First Violin Sonata (which the composer said should sound "like wind in a graveyard"), the Second Sonata is one of Prokofiev's sunniest compositions. There is no hint in this music

of the war raging in Russia at this time, and none of the pain that runs through the earlier sonata. The third movement is quietly wistful, and the music is full of Prokofiev's characteristically pungent harmonies, but the sonata is generally serene, a retreat from the war rather than its mirror.

The sonata is in the four-movement slow-fast-slow-fast sequence of the baroque sonata. The opening Moderato, in sonata form, begins with a beautifully poised melody for the violin, a theme of classical purity. The violin also has the second subject, a singing dotted melody. Prokofiev calls for an exposition repeat, and the vigorous development leads to a quiet close on a very high restatement of the opening idea.

The Presto sounds so brilliant and idiomatic on the violin that it is hard to imagine that it was not conceived originally for that instrument. This movement was in fact marked Allegretto scherzando in the flute version, but—taking advantage of the violin's greater maneuverability—Prokofiev increased the tempo to Presto in the violin version, making it a much more brilliant movement. It falls into the classical scherzo-and-trio pattern, with two blazing themes in the scherzo and a wistful melody in the trio. The end of this movement, with the violin driving toward the climactic pizzicato chord, is much more effective in the violin version than in the original.

The mood changes markedly at the Andante, which is a continuous flow of melody on the opening violin theme. The violin part becomes more elaborate as the movement progresses, but the quiet close returns to the mood of the beginning. The Allegro con brio finale is full of snap and drive, with the violin leaping throughout its range. At the center of this movement, over steady piano accompaniment, Prokofiev gives the violin one of those bittersweet melodies so characteristic of his best music. Gradually the music quickens, returns to the opening tempo, and the sonata flies to its resounding close.

String Sextet in A Major, Op. 48
ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born: 1841
Died: 1904
Composed: 1878

I. Allegro moderato
II. Dumka (Elegie). Poco allegro
III. Furiant. Presto
IV. Finale. Tema con variazioni. Allegretto grazioso, quasi andantino

Dvořák dated his manuscripts very carefully, and so we know that he wrote his Sextet for Strings in the space of only fourteen days: May 14-27, 1878. This was a crucial moment in Dvořák's career. After a long and trying apprenticeship, the 37-year-old composer found himself suddenly famous that year when his Slavonic Dances created an international sensation. But some of the finest musicians of the era were already alert to Dvořák's talent, and chief among these was Brahms, who had offered the unknown Czech composer his friendship, found him a publisher, and introduced him to his friends. The importance of the connection with Brahms can hardly be overstated, for it gained Dvořák performances by some of the finest musicians of the day. The Sextet for Strings had a private performance at the Berlin home of Brahms' good friend—violinist Joseph Joachim, and Dvořák, the son of a small-town butcher, was flabbergasted by his good fortune, writing to a friend: "after being here [in Berlin] for only a few hours I had spent so many enjoyable moments among the foremost artists, that they will certainly remain in my memory for the rest of my life."

Music for string sextets—two violins, two violas, and two cellos—is comparatively rare. Dvořák certainly knew Brahms' two sextets, composed during the previous decade, but the other two famous sextets—Tchaikovsky's Souvenir de Florence and Schoenberg's Verklaerte Nacht—were still in the future. Dvořák makes use of the resources available with six players, yet takes care to keep textures clear throughout. Longest of the four movements, the sonata-form Allegro moderato contrasts its flowing first melody with a rhythmically-sprung second idea in the unexpected key of C-sharp minor. The development makes ingenious use of bits of rhythm from both these ideas before this amiable movement fades out on a broad restatement of the opening theme.
The real gem of this sextet is the second movement, which Dvořák marks dumka. The use of this old folk-form is further evidence of the composer's

growing awareness of his distinctly Czech identity. Derived from Ukrainian folk music, a dumka is elegiac in character and often features sections at quite different tempos. The main theme of this movement, with a slow polka rhythm, is full of dark flashings in its melodic turns and key shifts. The two distinct contrasting episodes preserve the movement's somber character.

Dvořák marks the third movement Furiant, but numerous commentators have noted that it lacks the cross-rhythms and changing meters that define this old Bohemian dance form. In any case, this movement—which returns to the home key of A Major—offers sparkling outer sections and a busy trio. The finale is in theme-and-variation form. Lower strings present the somber theme, and six variations follow. The final variation forms an exuberant and lengthy coda that makes its way back to A Major only in the final bars.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger